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U. S. Department of Agriculture

Housekeepers' Chat

Wednesday, March 6, 1929.

Not for publication

Subject: "Pruning Roses and Shrubbery." Prepared by W. R. Beattie, Bureau of Plant Industry, U. S. D. A.

Bulletin available: "Roses for the Home," "Pruning."

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If you live in a seventh-floor apartment, with elevator, janitor service, and half a dozen other kinds of services, you will get only a vicarious thrill from this talk about spring work in the garden. But if you have a rose garden, or if you are planning to start a rose garden, you will be interested in W.R.B.'s information about pruning roses.

For a week or so I have been saving the letters which contain questions about roses. Saturday I took them over to W.R.B., the garden adviser. I read the letters to him, and wrote his answers to the questions.

The first letter was from a listener who said: "My roses seem to be badly winter-killed, especially at the tips; how shall I prune them?"

"Tell her," said W.R.B., "to cut them back cutting at least a half inch of the green or living wood, and to thin out all cross branches, especially those that are weak, or winter-killed. The softer growth, which is especially subject to injury by freezing, should have been removed last fall, and the plants protected with straw, pine boughs, or something else that would have prevented their winter killing.

"Hybrid tea roses, such as the Radiances, and various Killarneys, should be trimmed back in the fall to 2 feet, or even 18 inches, to keep the wind from whipping them around, and to make protection easier. In the spring these roses should be pruned again, removing any wood that may have been killed, and shortening the remaining branches so that the bush stands from nine to 15 inches high, depending on its vigor."

"What if these rose bushes were not pruned last fall?" I asked.

"In that case," replied the garden adviser, "prune them heavily this spring, even though their stems are not badly killed."

"I wish you'd tell me," I said, "how to prune my Red Radiance tea roses. They were not pruned at all last fall, and now the main stems are three or four feet high."

"That's because they were not properly summer-pruned," said W.R.B. "Head the plants back to within about a foot of the ground, remove all weak branches, and cut the strong branches back to four or five inches from the main stems. If you are striving for a limited number of fine specimen flowers, the pruning should be quite severe; if you want a large number of roses, regardless of their size, you need not prune so closely.

"Always use a good, sharp pair of pruning shears, so that the cuts will be clean and smooth. In making the cut, hold the shears with the cutting blade next to the part of the stem which is to remain, and cut the stem, with a slight slope, just above an outside bud."

"Why above an outside bud?" I wanted to know.

"Because, if you make the cut above a bud that is on the outside of a stem, the shoot that is produced by this bud will grow outward and upward from the center of the plant, and thus give the plant a spreading shape. On the other hand, if you make all your cuts above buds that are on the inside of the plant, the branches will grow inward, and form a close, crowded plant. Remember it is the terminal, or end, bud left in pruning that usually makes the strongest growth."

"How early should hybrid perpetual and hybrid tea roses be pruned?" I asked.

"Hybrid perpetual roses may be pruned just as soon as freezing weather is over, but hybrid tea roses should not be pruned until about the time they start to grow. Don't put off pruning until the buds really begin to form new shoots. Of course it all depends on where you are living. In the far south, the rose bushes are always growing, while in parts of the north, everything is still frozen, and it may be weeks before roses can safely be given their final pruning. But pruning should always be done before actual growth starts."

"Will the rose bushes need to be pruned again, or will one thorough spring pruning be enough?"

"One spring pruning is not enough," said W.R.B. "Naturally, you will give the plants about all the pruning they need, during the growing season when you cut off long-stemmed roses, for your table bouquets, and so forth. If, however, each flower was so cut that not more than two leaves or leaf scars were left at the base of each stem, the additional summer pruning required would be very slight. But the plants should be thinned out, and given a pretty thorough pruning, after each crop of flowers. Rose plants that are well fertilized and cared for have a tendency to put on too much wood; to become thick and bushy. These plants should be thinned out, and cut back at intervals during the growing season, if you want plenty of flowers. Any more questions?"

"Here's one from a listener who has a rose hedge bordering her lawn. Wouldn't that be beautiful, W.R.B.? I'd love a rose hedge, around my lawn. She wants you to tell her how to prune the rose hedge."

"Well, that depends on what kind of roses the hedge consists of. In general, rose hedges are handled so as to produce a thick growth, and a great mass of blooms, regardless of the size of the individual flowers. Most so-called rose hedges are double rows of cut-flower roses, usually pruned lightly, to give a mass of bloom. Both the hybrid perpetual and the hybrid tea roses are used for hedges, and will need a reasonable amount of pruning, especially in the early spring. Next question?"

"This one's from a man who wants to know how to prune a climbing rose. Are climbing roses pruned any differently from hybrid tea roses?"

"Very differently," said the garden adviser. "In the first place, climbing roses should not be pruned until after they bloom; then cut back the old wood, thin out the plants, and reduce the growth, but give the new shoots that may come up from the base of the plants, a chance to develop. Leave only the strong, healthy canes. When they reach the proper height, 'head them back,' as the nurserymen say, by cutting off the tip; then they will form branches. Prune climbing roses during the summer, but not in the fall or early spring; let them bloom first, then do your pruning. Who's next on your list?"

"A friend from the west. By the way, she says she likes your garden talks and wishes you'd give more of them. She doesn't even mention the recipes, or the green radio cookbook. That's the effect of spring -- I suppose all my loyal friends will be listening for your talks now, and turning down my nice recipes. Wait a minute! She hasn't deserted me. On the back of the page she says: 'I would be delighted to have a recipe for Pecan Waffles.' Now that's --

"Aunt Sammy," said W.R.B., gently reproving me, "are we discussing gardens or pecan waffles?"

"Gardens," I said. "This friend from the west wants to know how to prune flowering shrubs, like lilacs and spireas. What shall I tell her?"

"Tell her that spring and early flowering shrubs, like climbing roses, should not be pruned until after they bloom. After blooming, many of our early shrubs, such as golden bell and weigela sometimes need pruning. In such a case they should have their branches thinned, that is, cut back to a crotch. Quite often, some of the older stems should be removed from the center of the plants, in order to give the new shoots a chance.

"Late blooming shrubs, like the Hydrangeas, should be pruned early in the spring, before the buds start, as the flowers grow from the new wood. Don't be afraid to cut them back rather severely. Then give them a little fertilizer, so as to make a good growth of new wood and large blossoms. Next?"

"A correspondent wants to know about pruning evergreens, and whether they are pruned like ordinary shrubs. Are they?"

"No. Evergreens require different treatment; evergreens cannot be handled like the shrubs that shed their leaves. Arbor vitae plants can be sheared or clipped from time to time, in order to keep them in the desired

shape. Some people cut off the ends of the branches, removing only two or three inches of the tips; the branches grow out around the tips, and again form a compact growth. It is really better, however, to just clip them lightly, if at all. Hedges of *Arbor vitae* are clipped and kept in shape just like any other type of hedge. *Retinosporas* are also much helped by pruning, and hemlock may be given a smooth appearance instead of its free graceful form by use of the pruners. Fir and spruce need practically no pruning; let them grow as nature intended them to. Specimen plants of boxwood are usually allowed to grow naturally, but boxwood hedges are clipped as needed to keep the hedge uniform.

As a general thing, those who have valuable evergreens on their lawns would do well to consult a nurseryman or landscape gardener before doing any pruning. Any more questions?"

"No more, thank you. Are there any free bulletins, about roses?"

"Yes," said W.R.B. "Tell your listeners who love roses to send for the bulletins called Roses for the Home. It is for people who wish to grow roses for pleasure, and for the beautification of their home grounds."

W.R.B. gave me a copy of the bulletin. It is an excellent one. I shall be glad to send copies to those who want them.

Tomorrow: "Green Vegetables as Spring Tonic Substitutes." Program includes menu, and recipe for Pecan Waffles.

